



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Liquid Sky by Slava Tsukerman

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not through Selim, the ostensible focus of narrative attention. *Hanna K.*, ironically, provides a more succinct expression of the European-Zionist perspective than the vicissitudes of the Palestinian position it is supposedly advocating.

In a lengthy review of *Hanna K.*, Edward Said suggests that the film's "political message overrides its aesthetic problems." This artificial separation would seem to contradict Said's own subtle reflections on aesthetic questions in *Beginnings* and *The World, the Text and the Critic*, works that make explicit the relationship between textual analysis and ideological critique. Yet, in his own review he praises *Hanna K.* for its positive depiction of the anguished Palestinian. As we have already observed, however, the portrayal of the Palestinian forms part of a long tradition of representing the Orient, an issue discussed brilliantly in Said's *Orientalism*. The film's significance, then, cannot be attributed to the depiction of a "noble Palestinian." In fact, if compared to *Circle of Deceit* and *The Little Drummer Girl*, which merely use the Middle East as a backdrop, *Hanna K.* emerges as creditable in its effort to "allow us to witness the Palestinian quandary as a narratable human history."⁵ *The Little Drummer Girl*, for example, blurs political distinctions by emphasizing the savagery of both Israelis and Palestinians. This view assumes the superiority of the West to the "little wars" of "irrational" nations. This cynical stance is at least not shared by *Hanna K.*, which along with films such as Tawfiq Saleh's *The Duples* (1971) and Uri Barabash's *Beyond the Walls* (1984), attempts to disinter what has been hidden from history.

—RICHARD PORTON
AND ELLA SHOCHAT

NOTES

1. See "Colonialism, Racism and Representation," *Screen*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (March-April, 1983). Also "Slow Fade to Afro: The Black Presence in Brazilian Cinema," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2 (Winter 1982-3).

2. Joan Borstein, *Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 10-12, 1983, International Edition.

3. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

4. George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 470.

5. Edward Said, "Hanna K.: Palestine with a Human Face," *Village Voice*, October 11, 1983.

LIQUID SKY

Produced and directed by Slava Tsukerman. Screenplay by Tsukerman, Anne Carlisle and Nina V. Kerova. Photography: Yuri Neyman. Editor: Sharyn Leslie Ross. Music: Tsukerman, Brenda I. Hutchinson, and Clive Smith. Cinevista, Inc.

The first narrative film of Russian émigré Slava Tsukerman, *Liquid Sky*, is at heart a love story, albeit an unusual one. The central character Margaret (Anne Carlisle) eventually comes to love the space creature whose search for food—first heroin then opiate-like chemicals released in the brain during orgasm—has led it to her roof. The significance of Margaret's love is that it rescues her from a world of debased human relationships and finally transfigures her own being. Margaret is a member of the New Wave subculture as it exists in New York City. On the surface, she moves in a world of frenzied hair styles, bizarrely painted faces, and eccentric costuming. But, inwardly, she lives in a world where nourishment has been reduced to food, love to sex, and self-transcendence to heroin-induced highs. Yet Tsukerman handles his main character and her rather sordid world so that they present a vision of human possibility, a vision he sustains with exceptional cinematic style.

Tsukerman's vision is more convincing in our cynical age, perhaps, because it presents an existence shorn of ready possibilities. When we meet her, Margaret is already disaffected with her suburban Connecticut upbringing, and she is now experiencing a deeper alienation in the New Wave culture she has escaped to. Sexually, she is assaulted by those she hates: a Quaalude-dispensing creep and a heroin addict. She is forced in varying degrees by those she loves or likes: her professor and former lover, her lesbian partner and roommate, her fellow fashion model and male look-alike, Jimmy. As a model, Margaret out-Herods the extremest fashion looks of *Vogue*, and in a brilliant montage of stills Tsukerman treats us to a peacock display of New Wave fashions. But the drug-laden photography session of *Midnight Magazine* descends into a sadomasochistic sexual taunting of Jimmy and Margaret with the magazine personnel ringed round full of voyeuristic expectancy. So neither traditional society nor the New Wave underground, neither sexual engagement nor professional attainment offer Margaret sustenance. She finds

herself profoundly lost, deeply alienated as life's broad avenues turn into dead ends.

As a Russian émigré, Tsukerman has, no doubt, a special feel for what it is to experience alienation or to be an alien. While Tsukerman develops the serious side of alienation through Margaret, he wittily develops the lighter side through the character of a German scientist—an alien national—and ultimately through the other aliens—the beings from outer space. In creating this comic counterpoint, Tsukerman complicates and enriches the tone of his film. *Liquid Sky* is both serious and playful, dramatically earnest and satirically tongue-in-cheek.

Tsukerman suggests the response of the self to alienation in a provocative but elliptical treatment of perception. Mirrors appear constantly—the mirrors Margaret makes up in, the mirror on the roof balcony. While not mirrors strictly speaking, many other surfaces reflect light, such as the foil blanket used to cover a corpse or the metal sculpture by the balcony door. Likewise, the characters are often searching for or formally viewing one another. The German scientist repeatedly views the space creature through his telescope, thus placing Margaret's apartment under constant surveillance à la Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. The alien creature is itself imaged as something resembling an eyeball. Also, we are granted a vision of what the alien sees through a colorful kaleidoscope of computerized images. Finally, the heroin in Margaret's apartment is hidden behind a ceramic face mask. In overall effect, the "looking" suggests, perhaps, the self's search for meaningful communion with others while the mirrors and mask suggest the self's search for its own identity and worth.

In this search, our perceptions are usually guided by commonly accepted social and personal codes. But in *Liquid Sky*, the characters have abandoned traditional codes of behavior and must define themselves in new ways: through sex, drugs, New Wave music and dance. But their most powerful means of asserting a unique identity is through their clothing. Costume becomes a theater of the self. Indeed, Margaret and her former professor-lover articulate the point. The professor laments the passing of Margaret's student dress—jeans and turtleneck—and criticizes

her present "whorish" attire. She replies that he confused his jeans and turtleneck with his rebellion, thinking they stood for love, freedom, and social justice. Unlike him, she knows that she is wearing a costume. But Margaret's insight deprives her of one more avenue of meaning. Her costumes may assert her difference, but they do not contain the depth of social purpose the jeans and turtleneck did. For his part, Tsukerman takes full advantage of the characters' costumes to create a lush display of light, color, and fabric—a visual *tour de force*, really, extended by the handling of the setting and realized through Yuri Neyman's dazzling cinematography. So whatever we may think of the characters, Tsukerman presents them with undeniable visual power.

In both key scenes and overall structure, the film focuses the problem of identity on Margaret. One such scene is the rare moment of rest after the fashion photography session. The assembled models and crew name their hometowns, as in World War II films where the collective solidarity of the nation is suggested by soldiers naming diverse cities and small towns across the USA. In *Liquid Sky*, the first town is significantly (for the Russian émigrés) Moscow (Idaho, I think). The last is Philadelphia, again significantly the city of brotherly love. ("From Russia with Love" in a way.) As the scene evolves, Margaret becomes the symbolic embodiment of the larger nation evoked by the catalogue of towns and cities, for as one character states, she is the "new Miss America."

If this title suggests a social identity for Margaret, it is an ironic one, for her actions and conception of herself throughout the film negate all the normal middle-class values a Miss America supposedly represents. Later, in perhaps the film's most arresting scene, Margaret paints her face under black light and then adds accent stripes of red, yellow, and blue. At the same time, she speaks a monologue of utter disillusionment with the Connecticut suburban life of girl meets lawyer-prince, marries, has weekend barbecues for neighboring princes and princesses, and is bored as they say, "delicious, delicious." The disillusionment is total because the Bohemian-artistic alternatives are even more bleak—life as an aging model-actress waiting for the

break that never comes, with lesbian lovers rather than men walking on her bones. Margaret's plight is not just that the social mores are unacceptable but that, bereft of values, she is cast into a deepening inner crisis.

Nowhere is the problem of identity clearer than in the realm of sexual behavior. In her monologue, Margaret declares that she has rendered herself as androgynous as David Bowie. Earlier, she has raised the defiant question of why genitals should in any way govern who she chooses to love. So Margaret lives with a lesbian lover. Even more, the film plays with sexual identity by casting Anne Carlisle as both the female Margaret and the male Jimmy—and at one point having them make love of sorts to one another. In *Liquid Sky*, even biology and gender have lost their power to confer clear identity, let alone worth.

But amidst the problems of identity, love sends out its siren song of perennial, if dangerous, promise—the promise at once to affirm the worth of our being and to enable us to transcend the selfish confines of that being. *Liquid Sky* works out both the danger and the promise. In a series of parallel scenes, we see Margaret beset in turn by the Quaalude creep, by her professor, by heroin addict Paul, by fashion model Jimmy, and by lesbian lover Adrian. In contrast, the space creature finally embraces Margaret. The film thus moves from rape to marriage.

The structure may be viewed as one of thesis, antithesis, synthesis—a Marxist-Hegelian arrangement any Russian, even an émigré, can take a certain cultural pride in. The thesis: Margaret's lovers abuse her. Apart from the rape, Adrian and Jimmy both fight her physically. They and the professor all violate her will, too, by asserting their role as lover against her wishes. The antithesis: Margaret avenges herself. The professor, Jimmy, Adrian, and—in an act of premeditated vengeance—the Quaalude creep all die, zapped by the space alien in its quest for opiates released in the brain during orgasm. The synthesis: Margaret and the space alien come to love one another during the course of their symbiosis. In a visually striking climax, Margaret dons a wedding dress and climbs a fire escape to join the space creature—a joining shown in extreme fast motion during which Margaret flails about like a rag doll, a flailing suggestive of

orgasmic consummation. So the film progresses dialectically from sexual victimization through sexual retribution to sexual union.

In the last scene, Tsukerman resolves the issues of alienation and identity in the most fundamental way. In her union with the space creature, Margaret bridges the gulf between herself as a human being and an alien creature, a gulf that proves, ironically, less deep than that between Margaret and her fellow human beings. Margaret's earlier joyful exclamation, "Was that for me, Chief?" is her recognition that someone has treated her with kindness rather than selfishly exploited her. The creature does her the favor of vaporizing the embarrassing bodies in her apartment. This is a comic scene in the black humor vein of *Eating Raoul*. Moreover, in calling the creature "Chief" and "Indian," Margaret evokes the historical dimensions of alienation, for these terms remind us, however briefly, of the White Man's treatment of the Red Man. Margaret's sympathies are, of course, with her alien, her "Indian."

The film shows Margaret's union with the alien as an apotheosis, and this apotheosis endows the film's title with a new meaning. We have previously been informed that "liquid sky" is a poetic metaphor for heroin. But in the final scene, "liquid sky" becomes the beautiful metaphor for love's ecstasy. Margaret's love for the space creature symbolizes our human capacity to overleap that which would wall us in ourselves and make us aliens in our own world. "Liquid sky" is the expressive image for our flooding emotions when we make that leap.

Love transforms. Margaret, who has rejected heroin and its addicts forcefully throughout the film, ends by shooting herself full of heroin and begging the alien to "feed on me," heroin being the alien's food. (This is the culmination of a very witty set of food images: intercut restaurant scenes, Margaret's preparation of a chicken, a hilarious Chinese shrimp dinner, the foodlike preparation of heroin itself, and the space ship's resemblance to a "dinner plate.") The food imagery is appropriate, for Margaret wishes to nourish her beloved. Her sacrificial love transvalues the heroin.

In the broader context of the film, heroin and the use of drugs in general assume a larger

significance. They represent the profound human need for release from the alienation of life into an ecstatic state. The constant sexual questing of the film expresses an equally profound need for affirmation of the self in loving communion with others. As the film makes clear, without love, the ecstasy fails. The drugs merely debilitate; the sex is only someone walking on your bones. With deep insight, the film links, through the conception of the space creature, the sexual questing and the taking—both are human opiates. Yet if love be present, the opiate is not that of destructive escape but of transforming embrace. As the final scene suggests when Margaret is transfigured in a beam of white light, love creates the ecstasy; love leads into the liquid sky.

Much of the film's meaning and power exist because Tsukerman and Neyman realize the story in a cinematography of loving brilliance and transforming vision. The skies and skyscrapers of New York, indeed the whole cityscape, are photographed in rapturous colors: gorgeous lavenders, purples, golds, and oranges. As one character exclaims, enthralled by a rooftop view, "What a city!" Her loving embrace of the city is obvious in the music of her voice. The character puts into words the film's own loving visual embrace of its people, their dazzling costumes, and the New York setting. So it is ultimately not satire of a troubled culture but love of it, in spite of its flaws, that directs the eyes of these Russian émigrés. And "liquid sky" is their metaphor, too, for the transforming passion of that love.

So on the very terrain of life's bitterness, the film pitches love's mansion and envisions an ascent to glory from out of the depths. But if for many Tsukerman's answer remains outweighed by the problem, perhaps this is intended, just as with most philosophers the questions are ultimately more enduring than their answers. What is beyond much dispute, though, is that Tsukerman is an extremely talented filmmaker. *Liquid Sky* has the force, I believe, of Godard's *Breathless*, and while I would not expect Tsukerman to develop along the lines Godard has, he demonstrates an ability to create films independently that are of unusual merit. If he can retain his Russian émigré eye and its artistic integrity, he prom-

ises to stand with the likes of Pal Gabor, Istvan Szabo, and Andrzej Wajda, who collectively produce an Eastern European cinema the equal of any in the world.

—JOHN M. GOURLIE

CABARET'S INHERITORS Two New Films From Germany

Now that the New German Cinema is paunchy and middle-aged, there emerge among its inheritors directors like Wolf Gremm and Maximilian Schell, who would be making films anyway—with or without the movement. The dredging of Germany's Nazi past reaches new depths (psychological) in Schell's *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* (*Tales from the Vienna Woods*) and Wolf Gremm's *Fabian*, each modeled after another artist's work circa 1930, each a model of the prewar nostalgia spawned in *Cabaret*. One meaning of the word nostalgia is literally "homesickness," but the symptoms indicate that what ails the Germans has less to do with a lost thirties Heimat than with a chronic fear of its return. At least, that is the motive usually expressed when directors justify films about the effects or the origins of Third Reich. For some reason, the cabaret remains either a symbol or a microcosm of what was wrong with that Germany; thus, every film harking back to that extraordinary past must include a cabaret sequence with a tableau including a bevy of bare-breasted blondes. As of now, Maximilian Schell has made the only film where such nudity is not gratuitous. Schell's heroine is driven to exhibit herself to survive; Gremm's hero enjoys the exhibitionism of Berlin's exotica and lives off it.

Geschichten aus dem Wiener Wald is about the stripping of innocence, as a young girl is seduced and abandoned, reduced to displaying herself in a cabaret—a tale of honor lost in a manner reminiscent of Austria herself in the years before the Anschluss. Its source, the play that Ödön von Horváth wrote about 1930, has the poetic and political tendencies of *Threepenny Opera*, dealing with cosmic issues in street slang, while avoiding any tedious political didacticism. The milieu is the impoverished respectability of Vienna's small